プロローグ「恋文の国・b」 ― Confession・b ―

フォージリー村の人口が、一人増えた頃、
二人の旅人と、一匹の犬が、コンサート会場にいました。
それは、この国で一番有名な歌姫のコンサートでした。
それは、この国で一番大きな劇場でした。
満員で、大変な熱狂の中にありました。
二人と二匹は、先日この国に入国した旅人達でしたが、
『旅人は無料で招待している』
との歌手の意向で、
「いいなあ、旅人さん達」
「羨ましいよ……」
そんな国民達の羨望の眼差しを受けながら、
他の旅人と一緒に、とてもいい席に招待されていたのです。
隣に座る男の旅人など、ステージを見ながら、感動で泣いています。
滂沱です。
一匹の犬は、なんでそんなに泣いているのか不思議がりましたが、
「なんで泣いているんだ、俺……？」
本人にも分からない様子なので、考えるのを止めました。
コンサートは続きます。
広い広いステージの上で、その歌姫は歌います。
美しい顔を花のように輝かせて、
鮮やかな服を着て、
明るい歌を歌います。
そんなステージを見ていた旅人の二人が、白い髪の女の子が、首を傾げました。
そして、もう一人の旅人に、疑問を投げかけるのです。
「あのひと、なんかかなしそう。とても、あかるいうたなのに、どこかかなしそう。そして、とてもしあわせそう。ふしぎ。なんで？」
もう一人に、その謎の答えは、分かりませんでした。
歌姫は歌います。
『恋文』というタイトルの歌を。
私はいつも愛されている。私が愛しているあの人に。
そんな愛の歌を。

Prologue: Land of Love Letters - b
~Confession - b~

It was around the time when the population of the town of Forsily had grown by one.

Two travelers and a dog were in a concert hall.

They were at a concert featuring the most famous singer in the country.

They were in the biggest amphitheater in the country.

The seats were packed. Passionate cheers filled the hall.

The two people and the dog were travelers who had just recently entered the country.

They were there thanks to the fact that the songstress had instructed, *"All travelers are invited, free of charge."*

"Lucky travelers..."

"I'm so envious..."

The people of the country looked on jealously as the two people and the dog were invited to sit in very expensive seats, alongside other travelers.

The male traveler sitting next to them was weeping at the performance, moved by the song.

His tears streamed endlessly down his face.

The dog wondered why the man was crying so much, but,

"...Why am I crying...?"

The man himself seemed to be unable to understand. So the dog gave up.

The concert continued.

The songstress sang on the massive stage.

Her beautiful face shone like a flower in bloom.

She wore a stunning outfit.

She sang a cheerful song.

One of the travelers looking on at the performance—a girl with white hair—tilted her head.

She turned to another traveler.

"That person looks sad for some reason. It's such a happy song, but she looks sad. And she looks happy. Why is that?"

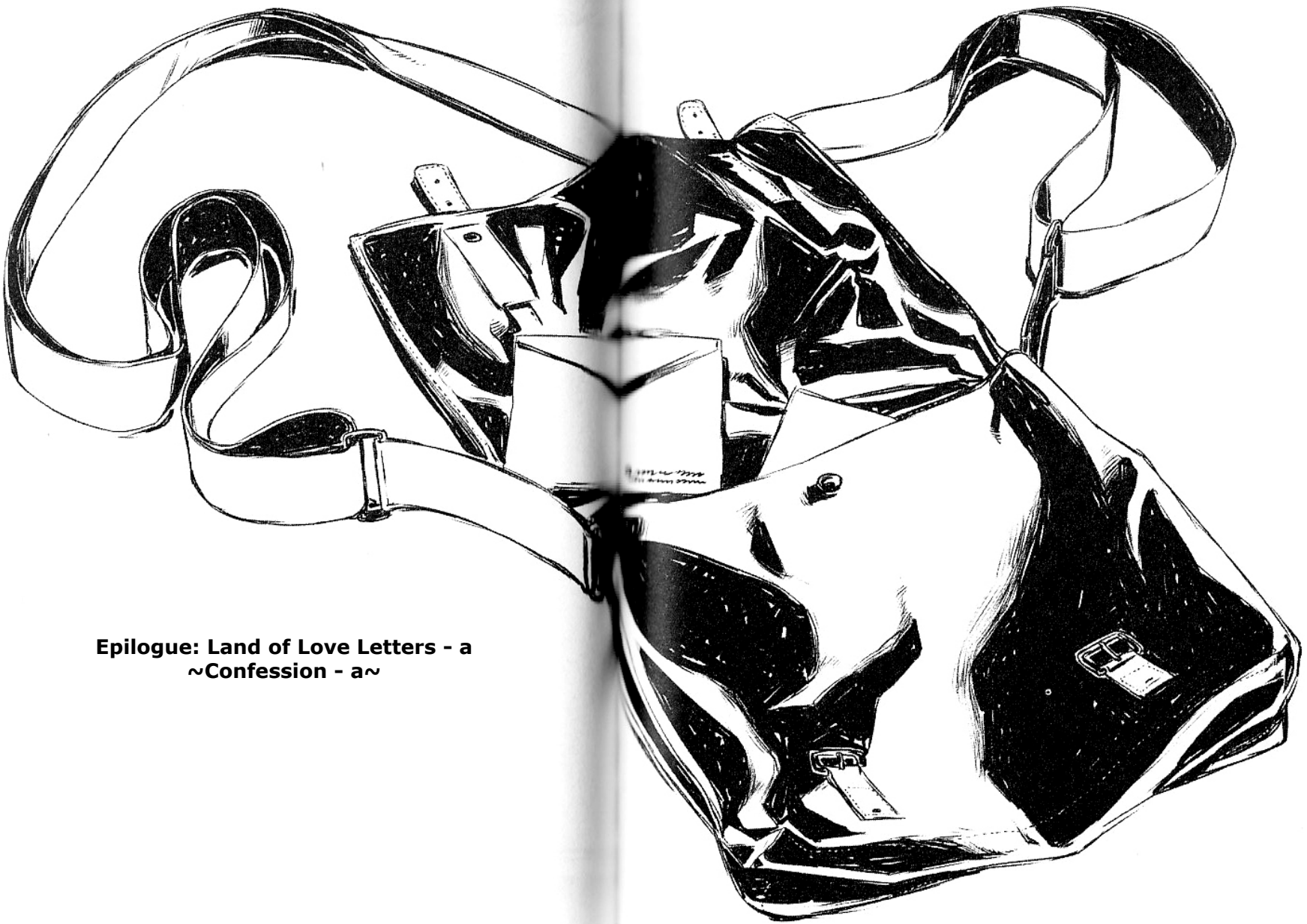
The other traveler had no answer to give.

The songstress continued.

The title of the song was ‘Love Letters’.

“I’m always loved by you, the one I love the most,” she sang.

It was a love song.



Epilogue: Land of Love Letters - a
~Confession - a~

My dearest Kate,

How are you?

It's been two whole seasons already, but I'm finally writing to you for the first time since I left on my journey. It's taken me so long to get these emotions of mine under control.

I always dreamed of leaving our country's walls to see the wide, wide, world. So I learned all sorts of skills and studied all sorts of things, and worked hard to save money.

I'm sure you and the rest of the people back home must have thought I was being an idiot. You must have thought that I was wasting my time.

But I really wanted to fulfill my dream, no matter what.

And I did.

These days since I left have been wonderful.

Mother nature couldn't look more stunning, free from the country's walls.

I escaped death by the skin of my teeth because of bad weather.

I met all sorts of people in the countries I visited on my travels.

Good people, bad people, strange people.

I'm enjoying my life so much right now. I love each and every day I live.

But still, I guess I have to apologize to you. For leaving you all alone back home while I left on my journey.

I'm so sorry.

-With love

My dearest Kate,

Today, I saw the end of a country.

While I was traveling, I saw some corpses lying on the road. All of them'd come from the same place.

When I arrived, I found a little country that was cut off from their food supply because of bad weather. In the end, it had collapsed completely.

There were more bodies than I could count lying on the streets, covered in snow.

Even though this place must have been full of people's laughter before.

I'm sure none of them expected their homeland would one day become a graveyard.

I looked down at one little body in the snow and wondered what it meant to live.

When you and I were that age...

We lived in our village, surrounded by our families. We had everything we ever needed.

I never thought death could come so easily.

And it never even occurred to me that a country could collapse.

I cried a little, in that deserted country.

And I thought of you.

I'm standing all alone in this cold place. But I'm alive.

And I still love you with all my heart.

I'll write to you again.

-With love

My dearest Kate,

It's summer again. I wonder if it's hot back home this year, too. The heat never really got to you, did it? I was always really bad with hot weather, though.

Right now, I'm in the highlands, three thousand meters above sea level. There's not much oxygen up here, and you can't call this temperature cool—it's downright cold.

And wait 'til you hear this—it's midsummer, but right now, I'm wearing a sweater!

I'm completely used to traveling now. I rise with the sun every morning, and fall asleep as the shadows grow like branches along the ground.

I miss those days we used to spend together, chatting and laughing in the bar until sunrise. We used to do so many stupid things when we were drunk. Remember how we made out on the bridge and ended up falling into the pond? I thought we were goners back then!

You know...

Back then, I thought those happy days would last forever.

I wonder when things changed?

When did I start to hesitate between leaving on a journey and marrying you to be with you forever?

I don't know the answer myself.

-With love

My dearest Kate,

I got told off really badly today. And it was your fault.

I'm working at a restaurant right now. I think the home cooking recipes from our village were pretty refreshing for the people in this country.

I made friends with the manager and chatted with her. Then I started talking about you.

You already know that my parents are gone, right?

So when she asked me if there was anyone back home waiting for me, I ended up mentioning your name. I told her, "I left on a journey, leaving behind the girl I grew up with and promised to marry".

When I said that, the manager got really angry with me.

"Never mind the food! Take off that apron right now and go home this instant!"

That was really scary. The other employees and the customers burst out laughing.

As we were cleaning up the place, the manager told me in a nostalgic voice.

She said that her lover left on a journey too, and that he hadn't come back yet.

She was running this restaurant so things'd be okay no matter when he returned.

I apologized to her. But she laughed and said,

"Save it for that girl of yours."

I'm sure you must be really angry, too.

I'll apologize as many times as it takes. I'm so sorry.

But I don't regret leaving on this journey.

And I swear: one day, I'll come back to be by your side.

-With love

My dearest Kate,

How are you?

I'm not doing so well right now.

To tell you the truth, I'm sick. It's kind of a serious illness.

And I was always confident about my health, too...

But the heavens haven't abandoned me yet! I got sick just before I arrived at this country. And the people here generously gave me treatment even though I'm an outlander. Medicine is expensive in any country, so this was like a miracle!

They told me that, for religious reasons, the people of this country live by the tenet of helping out those in need.

I was thankful. I was moved.

They're all such kind and friendly people.

So I decided:

Once I get better, I'll stay here for a while to help them. I want to give back to them for everything they've given me. I know there must be something only I can do!

So before that, I guess I'll have to get better again.

-With love

My dearest Kate,

I'm still not in very good shape.

But the doctor promised me that I would get better.

Once I get discharged from the hospital and pay back the people here for their kindness…

I'm going to come back home.

To you.

Kate.

There are so many things I want to tell you.

I want to tell you about my journey.

And I want to talk with you about our future together.

But in that moment we see each other again, there's only one thing I'm going to say to you.

'I love you'.

That's all.

-With love

Dearest Kate

I feel

so weak

I

can't write

But I want

to say this if nothing else

I love you

Don't forget me

I love you

I love you

I love you

I love you

Kate

Kate

I love you Kate

Don't forget me

Don't forget me

Don't forget me

I love you

I love you

I love

"'I love'? What about the rest?"

"That's as far as it goes, Hermes. I think he must have been really weak when he wrote this last letter. All I can see are some scribbles that don't really look like words." Kino answered, showing Hermes the letter before neatly folding it back up again.

She then meticulously placed the small pile of letters into a pocket at the bottom of a leather messenger bag.

It was a dark green leather bag, neither large nor small.

It was sturdy and completely intact.

Except for the tiny dents and scratches all over its surface.

Kino and Hermes were under the morning sun.

The summer sun shone down upon the plains, and Hermes, laden with travel gear, was propped up on his center stand next to a tree.

Kino stood leaning in the shade, against the large tree trunk. She was wearing her white shirt today.

Listening to the chirping of the birds flying to and fro between the branches, and looking down on the bag in her hands,

"Hm... What to do..."

Kino voiced her question.

"What do you mean, 'what to do'? The guy who owned this bag—the guy who wrote those letters—is already dead." Hermes said nonchalantly. Kino nodded.

"Yeah. This last letter is folded in a completely different way from the rest, and it's not even in an envelope. Someone from the hospital must have cleaned up his belongings after he died."

"And then someone snatched it and sold it off to a store that sells used stuff. Not that bad of a price for medical treatment." Hermes said jokingly.

"If I'd known, I wouldn't have bought this bag. What if I end up taking it to his hometown and running into someone he knew? What would they think?"

Hermes's answer came immediately.

"'Kino killed the man and stole his bag!'."

"You think so too? According to the addresses written here, his hometown was pretty close by, and it's on our way. It looks like he was traveling in the opposite direction as us."

"Then you have two choices, Kino."

"Which are?"

“First, it might be a really nice bag you really liked, but you can bury it. Second, you can go to that address once you reach that country and just give the letters to this woman named Kate. This guy says he was sick, so if you word it carefully, she won’t think you killed him and took his stuff, Kino.”

Kino mumbled in agreement. But she then added:

“I don’t mind giving her the letters, or even the bag, as a memento of him. But...”

“But?”

“To be honest, I don’t really want to make this Kate person sad. I don’t want to make plans for something like that.”

“Then choice number one it is.” Hermes said without a care. Kino looked somewhat dissatisfied.

“But... I can’t just throw these letters away. These were his last sentiments. If I can... I want to deliver them.”

“Then how about you just hang the bag on a branch somewhere so it’s easy to see? This tree’s perfect for camping under, so maybe another traveler’ll see the letters and deliver them to Kate. What one god tosses, another picks up.”

“...I’m surprised you actually got that saying right.”

“Well *excuse me*.”

“Hm.”

Kino thought for some dozen seconds before finally making a decision.

“Let’s go. Although I’m no god.”

They raced through the humid heat rising from the moist soil and the grassy woods.

“I wonder why he never mailed these letters. The countries in this area must have some sort of a postal system. And he even wrote out the address, too.” Hermes wondered.

“Who knows?” Kino answered, “I don’t think we’ll ever find out.”

“This is a pretty big country, Kino.”

Kino and Hermes were standing in the busy streets.

They had entered the biggest country in the region.

Many merchants frequented this country, which meant that shops and inns lined the streets from the vicinity of the walls onward. Clustered at the center of the country were high-rise buildings over thirty stories high.

“Let’s visit the address on the letter tomorrow. The town of Forsily in the western district, right?”

“I hope Kate still lives in that village.”

“Yeah. If we don’t deliver these letters to her, you and I are going to be the only ones in the country who know the whole story, Hermes. That sounds a little lonely to me.”

Kino rode along on Hermes.

Under the summer sky, dyed orange by the light of dusk, they drove between the other cars on the large street lined with fields.

Once they reached the central district, they found themselves surrounded by a veritable concrete jungle. Countless signs were decorated with gaudy flashing lights. Simply passing by made them feel as though they were looking at advertisements for all kinds of different products.

And in the midst of the sights and sounds,

“Look over there, Kino. It’s her again.”

There were signs decorated with photographs of a beautiful young woman.

She was a woman of around twenty, with long hair and elegant bearing.

She was advertising a wide assortment of products, from makeup to clothing, food, snacks, and home appliances.

“She must be really popular. I wonder who she is?”

“She’s a singer, Kino.”

“How’d you know?”

“That sign by the traffic lights.”

“...Oh, I see it.”

Hitting a red light, they came to a stop at a large intersection. There they had a great view of the sign hanging from the building on the street corner to their right.

The sign was the size of a house. A woman in a black dress stood before the setting sun, hanging her head ever-so-slightly with a melancholy look.

The tagline read:

‘A live concert at the National Amphitheater celebrating the release of the new album!’

Written underneath was a date and time still quite far away.

The words ‘Sold Out!’ were painted over the telephone number to be called for ticket bookings.

The singer’s name was not written on the sign.

“She must be pretty popular if they don’t even need to write her name.” Kino mumbled.

“Why don’t you try it too, Kino?” Hermes asked suddenly.

“What do you mean? Try what?”

“Why don’t you try your hand at being a singer? You’re pretty good too. You could wear frilly clothes and bounce on the stage like an idol.”

“Since when did you join a scouting company, Hermes?”

“I think it’s a pretty good idea. I bet you’d make a lot of money.”

“No thanks. I’ll do whatever I feel like.”

The traffic signal flashed back to green. Kino started off on Hermes again.

Having unpacked at the hotel introduced to her at the border, Kino stuffed herself at the restaurant and returned to her room, where Hermes waited.

“I’m back.”

“Welcome back.” Hermes replied. He was propped up on his center stand in the middle of the room, watching television. A showy liquor commercial was currently playing on the screen.

“Oh? I don’t remember turning on the TV before I left...”

“Welcome back, Kino. And don’t worry about details like that, or you’ll go bald one of these days.”

“I can’t have that happen.”

“Anyway, that singer is going to sing from the studios real soon.”

“Huh.”

Kino brought over a chair and sat next to Hermes.

Once the advertisements ended, a suit-clad man who looked to be the emcee began to speak, standing perfectly straight.

[Thank you for waiting, everyone! It’s finally the moment you’ve all been waiting for. A song from Kate Forsily’s latest album. <The One I Can Never Meet>.]

The scene changed.

The singer, wearing a black dress that almost looked like mourning garb, stood on the stage as she hung her head ever-so-slightly.

As the orchestra began to play the accompaniment, Kino turned to Hermes in shock.

"'Kate'? Kate Forsily?"

"Yeah. That's her name. Is this just a coincidence?"

"..."

Kino could not answer his question.

Back on the screen, Kate began to sing. Her voice was high, clear, and beautiful.

It was an unhappy song.

A terribly sad song about the sentiments of a woman whose beloved had departed suddenly, leaving her despondent.

The next morning, Kino rose with the sun.

She did her usual exercises with all the persuaders in her possession, cleaned them out, and loaded their magazines.

She took a relaxing shower and filled her belly with breakfast. And then,

"Excuse me. I have a question."

Kino began to ask around about Kate Forsily at the front desk and the hotel lobby. She asked both employees and other patrons, but not one of them did not know her name.

Everyone answered Kino's question as though bragging about how much they knew about her.

Kino returned to her room and delivered this information to Hermes.

Kate Forsily.

She had just turned twenty-one years of age.

She had made her debut as a singer two years ago, and slowly gained popularity. She became the undisputed top singer of this country last year around this time.

She was known for always dressing in black, composing and writing the lyrics to her mournful and moving songs herself.

Unusually for a celebrity, she was extremely introverted and meek.

That had come as a refreshing change to this country, a place so full of vibrant energy, that it helped propel her to stardom.

Her gorgeous looks also led her to appear in many advertisements.

But perhaps she was afraid to stray from this image of hers. Although the record companies and her fans begged her to begin singing more cheerful love songs, she had turned down their requests without a moment's hesitation.

This was why some believed that people would soon tire of her image and move on.

"I get it. But what about the most important part?"

"Don't worry, Hermes. I made sure to ask, 'Where is her hometown?'."

"So where was it?"

"Everyone told me. She's from—"

[Welcome to Forsily! Population: 2467]

Kino and Hermes were standing in front of a sign.

Kino was on Hermes, wearing a black jacket over her white shirt under the scorching summer sun. Hermes was not carrying any luggage, save for the two black boxes on either side of his rear wheel.

They were in the western district of the country. A lazy countryside view was spread all around them.

"All right. First off..."

Kino unfolded a scrap of paper with directions to the ward office. She traced the path with her eyes, and spotted the biggest building within sight behind a grove of trees.

"We'll go to the ward office and look up the address on the letters. If 'Kate Forsily' really does live there..."

"If she does?"

"What then? I doubt Kate Forsily herself lives there now. And I don't think she'd agree to meet us just because we came all the way to her house."

"Anyway, we'll worry about that later. Let's go check it out, Kino. Who knows? Maybe the Kate in the letters is a completely different person."

"All right."

Kino pocketed the piece of paper and started Hermes.

"She's not?" "She isn't?"

Kino and Hermes said in perfect unison.

The middle-aged man assisting them at the ward office replied,

"Not at all, I'm afraid. You two must have mistaken our Kate for the famous singer."

"Oh... Um, well... Yes. We were curious." Kino answered, not entirely untruthfully.

"So this is a different Kate, huh..." Hermes said. The middle-aged man chuckled.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but our Kate is named 'Kate Faraday'. Although I understand why you travelers were confused; she's the only one with that name, after all."

"..."

Kino remained silent.

"Don't the people in this country mistake this Kate for the singer and come to find her or anything?" Hermes asked.

The man laughed even more heartily.

"Hah! They did before, but not anymore. Everyone here knows that Kate Forsily's name is a pseudonym."

"I see." "I get it."

"It's true she's also from Forsily, but she only lived here until she was six years old. Afterwards, she grew up in the central district. She only comes back here a few times a year. And now that her grandparents have passed away, she has no reason to come back at all. After she became famous, we did mention to her that we'd like to make her an honorary citizen, but..."

"But?" "What happened?"

"She politely turned down the offer through a letter from a representative. 'That's too much of an honor, considering I only lived in Forsily for a short time. I'm sorry for using the town's name as my pseudonym without permission', she said. Even though *we're* the ones who're grateful for her name."

"I see." "Hm."

"Honestly, we wouldn't get many travelers in this village without misunderstandings like this! Since you're here, why not take your time sightseeing? The view is magnificent, and we've got some scrumptious, newly harvested vegetables!"

"Of course. Thank you for your help."

"Thank you."

Once Kino and Hermes were gone,

"I can't believe travelers really *did* come because of a misunderstanding like that..." The middle-aged man muttered, stepping into a phone booth at the entrance of the ward office.

Although there was a telephone at his own desk, he chose to make the call through the public line, using change from his own pocket.

Answering his call was another man. The man at the ward office said,

[A young traveler on a motorrad just came to the village, thinking Kate Forsily still lived here. Is this good enough of a report?]

"So the mystery is solved, Kino." Hermes said as he drove along the road. Kino nodded, satisfied.

"I'm glad we decided to come. So the 'Kate' in the letter wasn't Kate Forsily, but Kate Faraday. And here I was, thinking Kate became a famous singer after her boyfriend left on a journey."

"I was thinking the same thing. But I guess that wasn't it. Let's go visit the real Kate!"

"Yeah. Although we're not exactly bringing her good news."

"But Kino! This is why we came to this country in the first place. What about your plans?"

"You're right, Hermes."

Kino and Hermes went to the address written on the letters.

The house was easy to find.

It was a single, detached home surrounded by vast fields.

There was a yard filled with plants and flowers. There was an archway overgrown with roses. There was a sign that confirmed the address Kino was looking for. There was a nameplate with the name 'Faraday' on the door.

"All right..." Kino said, propping up Hermes on his center stand. She took a deep breath.

"Oh my! A guest?"

At that moment, a woman's voice rang brightly from somewhere. Kino turned to find her.

A woman poked her head out from between the plants in the garden.

She was a chubby, gentle-looking woman in her thirties. She was wearing a bright blue skirt, and an apron embroidered with flowers. Her hands were covered with soil, likely because she was doing gardening work.

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm a traveler. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner Hermes. Your garden was so beautiful that we decided to stop to have a closer look."

The woman smiled radiantly at Kino.

"I'm flattered! It looks like all that work wasn't for nothing after all. But it's so unusual to see travelers so far out in the countryside. Would you like to come in for some tea? I was just about to get some rest. I'm sure my break would be much more fun if there was someone to talk to. Oh! Where are my manners? My name is Kate. Kate Faraday."

Kino,

“By all means.”

Did not hesitate for a single moment.

Kino and Hermes were led into the parlor, a wide-open room next to the garden with a wonderful breeze.

Kino and Kate sat across the table from one another in wooden chairs. Hermes was propped up on his center stand beside them.

As usual, Kino carefully inspected the tea Kate poured for her before taking a single sip.

“It’s delicious.” She said honestly.

Kate spent a long time chatting about how she could brew delicious tea from the herbs in her garden.

Once Kate’s passionate discussion came to a close, Kino spoke up to fulfill the purpose of her visit.

“Ms. Faraday. This might be a bit sudden, but have any of your friends or acquaintances left this country to go on a journey?” She asked solemnly.

“Hm? No.”

Kate’s answer was simple and without a moment’s hesitation.

“None of my friends or relatives have ever left the country’s walls.”

“...”

Kino could not find the words to continue. But,

“Really? I guess not many people here leave to travel.” Hermes said, quickly shifting the direction of the conversation.

Kate answered just as nonchalantly as before.

“That’s not really true, either. Merchants visit our country all the time, and a lot of people are inspired by them to leave the walls. But I can’t do that myself, of course... More tea, Kino?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, please. So, has anyone from this town left on a journey?” Kino asked. Kate, refilling her cup, responded,

“I’m not sure. *Did* anyone ever leave...?” She wondered out loud, honestly unsure, “well, this might be a small town, but even I don’t know everyone who lives here. I’m sure it’s just my age. My memory isn’t what it used to be.” She laughed.

“...”

Kino said nothing.

"Hey! I heard there's a famous singer in this country with the same name as you, Ms. Kate." Hermes said. Kate replied,

"Oh, yes! Kate Forsily! I'm surprised you know about her."

"It's kind of impossible *not* to know who she is once you've stepped into this country."

"She's really very wonderful. I'm a big fan of hers."

"We went to the ward office to look at the area map when we heard some things about her. She lived here when she was little and came back to visit a few times, right?"

"That's right. I saw her when I was younger, too. I even played with her at the town festival! In this town, older kids usually take care of the younger ones, you see. Back then, she was a bit of a wallflower, but she must have grown so beautiful after she moved to the city. My entire family loves her!"

"Wow. I guess that's a popular singer for you."

"At first, some people got her confused with me because of her name! That was because she didn't say that her name was a pseudonym back when she first made her debut. People ended up sending me fan letters and gifts by mistake! You have no idea how confused I was. How could they confuse a country bumpkin like me with a beautiful young lady like her? I'm sure she'd be upset if she knew. Ahaha!"

Kate laughed jovially.

"..."

Kino fell into thought. She thought for some time. But,

"What should I do...?"

"Hm? Is something wrong, Kino?"

"Oh! Nothing. I was just talking to myself. Just out of curiosity, Ms. Faraday, do you live here by yourself?"

"No. I live with my husband—we've been married for four years now—and our two children. I'm pregnant with our third right now, so next year, we'll be a family of five. They went out today to the pond to fish for catfish. I hope they bring home a whopper!"

After a veritable feast of tea and cookies, Kate invited Kino and Hermes for lunch. But,

"We'd like to sightsee around town some more." Kino said, finally free from the talkative Kate.

She waved at Kate, who came all the way outside to see her off, and started Hermes.

"Is she the one? Or is she not?" Kino asked, wondering to herself.

With the bag and the letters still inside the black boxes, Hermes answered,

“I think she must be the one. This is the right address, and I just don’t think it could be someone else.”

“Then... Maybe Kate Faraday decided to forget her old boyfriend so she could move on? To live happily with her husband and children?”

“Maybe. From the looks of the ink, these letters can’t be more than five years old. But since he never wrote down any dates, we can’t say for sure.”

“Right. So we still have a mystery on our hands.” Kino said, driving Hermes slowly, “we’re... going off-track from our plans, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“In other words... maybe I could just keep this bag for myself, along with its mystery?”

“Well, maybe.”

“What about the letters? There’s no one to read them now.”

“Why don’t you burn them? Maybe his feelings will scatter and reach the heavens.”

“Maybe. I’ll consider it once we leave this country.”

Kino and Hermes slowly rode through the lonely countryside.

<=>

“Are you the traveler who visited the town of Forsily today?” Asked a suit-clad man, once Kino and Hermes had returned to the hotel.

Back in Forsily, Kino had chowed down on the local vegetables as the man from the ward office had recommended. She returned to the hotel at a meandering pace, once afternoon was past.

The hotel lobby was nearly empty. Kino responded to the thirty-something man.

“Yes.” She said simply.

“I’m sorry for approaching you so suddenly. Here.” The man took out a business card from his breast pocket and handed it to Kino.

Kino skimmed the card and held it in front of Hermes. On it was written the man’s name and his occupation. He was an employee at a record company.

“Wow! I wonder if he’s here to scout you, Kino. Maybe you’ll become an idol in frilly clothes and sing cheery songs to overtake Kate Forsily and her depressing songs!” Hermes said jovially.

“What? I’m sorry, but that’s not...” The man trailed off, extremely confused. He shook his head. “If you’ll give us a bit of your time. There’s someone who’d like to speak to you. I can’t tell you the specifics here, but this is very important—both for yourself and for this person. We’ll compensate you as much as you need.”

Kino looked up at the polite but serious man.

“You’re calling us because you know we visited Forsily, right?”

“That’s correct.” The man nodded firmly.

“Then I guess I have no choice.”

Kino and Hermes entered the man’s van.

Hermes was secured with rope to the large bed of the van. Kino sat in the passenger seat. She brought her persuaders along.

The van drove towards the central district. It soon entered the underground parking lot of a tall building.

It was a heavily guarded building, protected by security guards armed with persuaders. The man explained that this was the country’s most luxurious apartment building.

Kino and Hermes followed the man onto an elevator.

They soon arrived at the top floor. When the elevator doors opened, they were greeted by yet another guard.

Kino crossed the soft carpet of the halls, pulling Hermes along. She was led into a large parlor, where the curtains had all been shut.

The person who wanted to meet Kino waited there.

She got up from her seat and turned to Kino and Hermes.

“Thank you so much for coming.”

She bowed deeply.

Kino and Hermes recognized her instantly.

The man quickly served them tea and left the room.

Left behind in the parlor were Kino, Hermes,

And the woman they had seen on countless billboards.

Kino addressed the songstress across the table.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Forsily. My name is Kino. This is my partner Hermes.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Wow... you look even prettier in person!”

Kate Forsily, wearing the plain combination of a dark blue skirt and a white shirt, with her long hair tied back in a ponytail, bowed lightly at Kino and Hermes with a beautiful but downcast look.

“It’s nice to meet you both. And I’d like to thank you again.”

She then revealed the reason she had called them here.

“I asked the ward office to contact my management company if a traveler were to ever come looking for a ‘Kate of Forsily’.”

Kino met the songstress’s resolute gaze and replied,

“I see. That’s why we’re here now.”

Kate continued.

“Yes. You’re the first travelers to come looking for Kate. Please, tell me. Why did you decide to visit that town?”

“...”

Kino looked away for several seconds, and turned to Hermes.

Hermes’s response was,

“Why did we come here in the first place, Kino?”

Instead of giving an answer, Kino got up from the sofa. She then pulled out the leather bag from the box next to Hermes’s rear wheel. She placed it on the table.

She could sense Kate drawing a sharp breath.

Kino did everything she could to calmly explain how she came by this bag.

How she had bought it in a country she had visited not long ago.

How she discovered several hidden letters as she drove along the plains.

How the letters were addressed to a ‘Kate of Forsily’.

And how she had visited the only ‘Kate’ in that village this morning, but how the woman did not recall any past lover, as though he had never existed to begin with.

Kate was listening to Kino’s explanation, her face frozen in silence like a beautiful doll.

“Those letters... Do you still have them with you?” She asked slowly.

“Yes. They’re still in the bag.”

“...”

Averting her gaze, Kate made to reach for the bag on the table, but suddenly hesitated. Her face took on a demonic look, but only for an instant.

Folding her hands over her lap once more, Kate looked at Kino.

“Kino. Please, sell this bag to me! Please let me keep it!”

Before Kino could answer, Hermes said in a joking tone,

“It’s gonna be expensive, you know? How much are you gonna pay?”

Kate’s answer was immediate.

“I’ll give you all the money I have!”

Her voice filled the spacious room.

“...”

Kino was stunned into silence.

“Sold! Do you want a receipt?” Hermes said, still in a joking tone.

“Please!” Kate begged, “sell me those letters! I’ll pay you anything, so please!”

“Please calm down. These letters won’t benefit me in any way. All I wanted to begin with was the bag. And even then, all I need is something sturdy about the same size.”

“Then...!”

“And I have no intention of accepting such a ridiculous sum of money. I’d be thankful for whatever is enough to support me on my journey. But...”

“Yeah. We’re after something more important.”

“What are you looking for?” Kate asked Kino and Hermes.

“The answer to this mystery. To be honest, I’m very confused. If you know the answer we’re looking for, please tell us.”

About ten seconds passed in silence. Kate finally spoke.

“All right. But first... please let me read those letters.”

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re just going to *take* them and not pay!”

Kino ignored Hermes and said,

“Of course.”

Kate read the letters.

Her lovely face was still, only her eyes slowly scanning the words on the letters.

Even as she read the final letter, her expression refused to budge.

Once she was finished, she neatly folded up the letters and placed them on the table in a single pile.

“Big Brother, you idiot...” She whispered, her eyes averted.

In the silence, even Kino could hear her voice.

“May I ask a question?” She asked. Kate looked up.

“Of course.”

“Miss Forsily, you know who wrote these letters, don’t you?”

The answer would confirm her suspicions. Kate Forsily nodded.

“His name was Theo. He was from the town of Forsily. If he were still alive, he would have been thirty years old this year. He ran off three years ago to leave on a journey.” Kate said mechanically.

“Then who was this ‘Kate’ he was writing to? Who is this girlfriend of his?”

“I want to know, too.”

Kate smiled faintly at Kino and Hermes.

It was the gorgeous smile of a beauty, but her face was as melancholy as it was when she sang.

If the face of this morning’s Kate under the sun was like the flowers she had been tending to, the face of this Kate in the darkened room was like a flower blooming by night.

“The ‘Kate’ you met this morning is the woman Theo loved. There’s no mistaking it.”

“Kate Faraday, you mean?” Kino asked for confirmation. Kate Forsily nodded.

“Yes. Just like the letter says, Kate Faraday and Theo were childhood friends. They were the same age.”

“Then...”

Kino thought for a moment before continuing,

“Did she really move on and forget Theo?”

“Yes. She did.” Kate answered immediately. And,

“But there’s a lie in these letters. One lie that changes everything. You two are confused because you don’t know what Theo was lying about.”

“A lie?”

“What was it? And how do *you* know?”

In the room darkened by curtains, the songstress answered the travelers.

“Kate Faraday never dated Theo. The two of them were never lovers.”

“What do you-” “What?”

“Theo had a crush on Kate Faraday. Ever since he was old enough to understand. And even when they grew into adults. But they never went beyond having played together at village festivals when they were younger. He never confessed to her. Theo was timid, and he was never confident about his looks. He could never ask out the girl he loved.”

“...” “...”

Kino and Hermes were at a loss for words. Kate Forsily continued.

“Theo lived in that village, hopelessly in love with her, until he was eighteen years old. Then he moved to the central district to attend college. Even after that, he still loved Kate Faraday. Even though he’d never even really talked to her. He always thought, ‘Since I love her so much, one day we’ll be together’. Yes. He really believed this was going to happen. He came back to Forsily a few times a year, and he was sure that he would run into her somewhere in the village, and she would see somehow that he was a wonderful person, and confess her love to him.”

“...” “...”

“His fantasy was smashed to bits when Kate Faraday got married. Obviously, she’d completely forgotten him. Theo was crushed. He decided to escape from this country.”

“So... that’s why he left on a journey...” Kino finally managed to say. Kate Forsily continued stoically.

“Yes. Theo left this country, even though he’d never even considered going on a journey before. Even though he didn’t have the skills to travel alone. I’m sure that, the moment he stepped outside the gates, he changed around his past so that he and Kate Faraday were actually lovers engaged to be married, but that he had abandoned her to fulfill his lifelong dream of traveling.”

“...”

“These letters are proof. Theo wrote these letters he couldn’t send, to his fictional lover Kate Faraday. He was running away into a beautiful past he’d created for himself. I’m sure he must have lied to the people he met on his journey and told them that he’d left his lover behind to travel. But...”

Hermes continued where Kate left off,

“After diving into something he wasn’t ready for, he ended up getting sick and died, huh.”

Kate Forsily nodded quietly. She reached for her already-cold cup of tea.

“I see. Now I understand. The mystery’s finally been solved.” Kino said with a sigh, “Miss Forsily. A little while ago, you called him ‘Big Brother’.”

“Yes? Yes. I did.”

Kate sounded a little surprised, but she acknowledged her actions and placed her teacup back on the saucer.

“In other words, are you, Kate Forsily, the younger sister of Theo? Is that why you know so much about him?”

“Oh, that makes sense! I get it now. Mystery solved!” Hermes said triumphantly.

But Kate Forsily laughed.

She laughed ever so quietly.

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m not Theo’s sister. We’re not even related. We’re just both from Forsily. We’d known each other for years.”

“Then... how? How do you know so much about him?”

“It’s because I love Theo.”

“You must be surprised.

“I love Theo.

“Back then, I was little, I was timid, introverted, and shy around strangers.

“I wasn’t very good at sports or school. I was awkward at everything. That’s what I believed.

“I couldn’t even step into the friendly atmosphere between the other kids in the village. I always felt isolated. Things were so painful and sad back then.

“The one person I opened up to back then was Big Brother Theo, who was nine years older than me.

“We were kindred spirits.

“We both hated ourselves for being so talentless, but at the same time we loved ourselves so much that we suffered, not knowing what to do with that disparity. All we could do was languish in that pain.

“Big Brother Theo was always quiet, but he understood me better than anyone. He was always so nice to me, even though I couldn’t get along with other people very well.

“When I was a little girl, nothing made me happier than talking with him.

“Even after I moved away, we exchanged letters and sometimes met up together. We kept in contact regularly.

“Then, I found out that Big Brother Theo was in love with Kate Faraday.

“Back then, I didn’t know a thing about love. I even wrote him letters cheering him on.

“But he never confessed his feelings to her, and he lived on with his one-sided love.

“And once I became a teenager, I came to a realization.

“I realized that I was in love with him. That I loved him more than anyone else.

“But I couldn’t tell him.

“I thought there was no way things would work out when Big Brother was still smitten with Kate Faraday. I thought I would just make things difficult for him.

“So I wished that he would get together with Kate Faraday soon.

“But that never ended up happening.

“Kate Faraday married someone else, and Big Brother Theo decided to leave the country.

“I couldn’t say a thing to him.

“No ‘Don’t go’s. Not even an ‘I love you’.

“I’m just like Big Brother Theo.

“I’m someone who couldn’t get her feelings across.

“I was so sure that Big Brother Theo would come back from his impulsive journey and turn his eyes to me.

“I was so sure that he’d forget Kate Faraday, and fall in love with me as I came to welcome him with a smile.

“I was so sure that, even if I never told him my feelings—even if I never confessed—that he he would know somehow. That one day, we could be happy together.

“Both me...

“And him...

“How could we be so naive?

“How could we be so stupid?

“But he’s never going to come back now.

“I’ll never be able to see him again.

“Never.

“Never again...”

Kate Forsily, her voice as cold as ice, suddenly took a deep breath.

She then let loose her emotions.

“I should have told him!

“I should have told him I loved him!

“I should have told him not to go!

“I should have begged him with tears in my eyes!

“I should have stopped hesitating and just told him I love him!

“Big Brother, how could you be such an idiot?!

“How could *I* be such an idiot?!”

Kate Forsily’s final utterance rang out through the room, and faded. Following next was, again, her voice.

Plainly she continued, as though reciting a familiar passage.

“As I waited for him, I wrote a song.

“Hoping my sorrows would fade with the melody.

“All I did was sing in the empty park,

“But never in my wildest dreams did I think so many would love that song.

“As I prepared for my debut, they asked me for the name with which I would sing.

“I decided on my name as though I was throwing up all the dark emotions inside my heart.

“My name would be Kate Forsily.”

At the end of Kate’s monologue, Hermes spoke up.

“If you’d told him, you never would have become a singer, huh?”

“No. But that doesn’t matter.”

“I see.”

Hermes was satisfied with her answer. He did not ask anything else.

Nor did Kino.

“Thank you for telling us all this. Now the mystery is solved. I finally understand everything.”

And,

“This bag and the letters are yours, Miss Forsily.”

Kate Forsily smiled.

“Tell me.”

From her lovely mouth came the words,

“I am Kate. These letters were written for me, weren’t they? ...They belong to me, don’t they?”

Kino gave her her answer.

Stepping into the sunlight from the underground parking lot, Kino and Hermes began to drive along the thoroughfare.

“Kate looked so happy in the end, Kino.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen anyone look that happy.”

“Me too.”

“Not exactly as planned, though.”

“Yeah.”

The traveler on the motorrad left the country. Time passed.

And,

It was around the time when the population of the town of Forsily had grown by one.